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## ABSTRACT

This paper relates pedagogical reasons for students not knowing what educators think they should know about social studies. In the past and the present, those who have sought to redress this discrepancy have generally placed more emphasis on changing the formal curriculum than on changing the method, even though the formal curricula have limited and variable effects on what ensues behind the classroom door. The task of motivating students to learn what educators think they should learn depends far more on the purposes and methods brought to bear in the classroom than on a curriculum proposed by a national commission or mandated by a state education agency. The paper further explains why subject matter and instructional methods cannot be considered dichotomous and considers the ramifications of such a position for social studies reform. (Contains 27 references.) (BT)

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# The Persistent Problem of Method in Social Studies Teaching.

by Stephen J. Thornton

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# **The Persistent Problem of Method in Social Studies Teaching<sup>1</sup>**

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My argument concerns the pedagogical reasons for students not knowing what we think they should know about the social studies. Both in the past and today, those who have sought to redress this discrepancy have generally placed more emphasis on changing the formal curriculum than on method (Hertzberg, 1981, pp. 165-168). Formal curricula, however, have limited and variable effects on what ensues behind the classroom door. The daunting task of motivating students to learn what we think they should learn depends far more on the purposes and methods brought to bear in the classroom than on a curriculum proposed by a national commission or mandated by a state education agency. In the remainder of this paper, I explain why subject matter and method cannot be considered dichotomous and the ramifications of my position for social studies reform.

## **The neglect of method in social studies reform**

The social studies combine history and the social sciences for purposes of instruction. This school subject has been variously interpreted since its emergence to mean a collective noun for courses in individual “social” subjects such as history, geography and government or courses drawing freely across subject boundaries in order to address significant social concerns. Disputes over the proper content and organization of the curriculum have, of course, been the source of perennial debate. Nevertheless,

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was prepared for a Division B symposium, “Why don’t students know what we think they should? Pedagogical, philosophical, and cultural contexts of learning in the social studies,” at the annual

whether the social studies is based on discrete subjects or their integration, decisions must be made on how and by what criteria subject matter is organized and directed; that is, method.

Whatever the prevailing fashion has been in social studies curriculum, however, critics have charged that students are not learning enough of what they should be learning. Periodically, this complaint persuades some combination of politicians, national commissions, journalists, advocacy groups and academics to propose reform. The most common approach to reform has been adding, modifying or replacing subject matter (e.g., Bradley Commission on History in Schools, 1988; National Center for History in the Schools, 1994; National Commission on Social Studies in the Schools, 1989; Ravitch & Finn, 1987; Wesley, 1944). But what are the effects of curriculum reform on teaching and learning in classrooms?

In this regard, seasoned educational critics have long pointed to another matter seemingly neglected by social studies curriculum reformers. As John Goodlad (1984) concluded, the topics commonly included in the social studies “appear as though they would be of great human interest. But something strange seems to have happened to them on the way to the classroom” (p. 212). From this perspective, altering the content of the formal curriculum is a crude and unpredictable determinant of the curriculum enacted in classrooms--and this is the curriculum students actually encounter. In other words, teaching is the key to student learning (Shaver, Davis, & Helburn, 1980, p. 16). Reform efforts centered on adding, modifying or replacing content while skirting over questions

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meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Diego, April 16, 1998. I am grateful to David Flinders and Margaret Crocco for their criticisms of earlier versions of this paper.

of method will probably be ineffectual. This is by no means to say that the subject matter is trivial. Rather, it is to argue that reform is unlikely to have the desired effects on educational practice at the classroom level if method and subject matter are treated as discrete entities.

As John Dewey (1916) pointed out: "Method is not antithetical to subject matter; it is the effective direction of subject matter to desired results" (p. 165). In other words, method has both a normative ("desired results") and a procedural dimension ("effective direction"). Method cannot be neatly bifurcated from what students learn (see Fenton, 1967, p. 57; Hertzberg, 1988; Levstik, 1990). For example, researchers of the enacted curriculum have shown that neither the adoption of a curricular ideology such as "cultural literacy" (Flinders, 1996) nor even the utilization of the same course of study (Thornton, 1988) necessarily predicts the character of instruction or its likely effects on students.

Thus far, I have argued that securing a fuller understanding of why students do not learn what we want them to learn requires attention to both what is taught and how it is taught. From this perspective, the frequent charge that students are not learning what they should because certain subject matters are, or are not, afforded proper priority is at best only part of the story. Indeed, we might ask whether it really matters what the curriculum contains if students emerge indifferent to it? Furthermore, why, when so many school reformers underscore the complex, ecological character of educational change (see Newmann, 1985), do social studies reformers rely so exclusively on the curriculum as the keystone of educational change?

I shall point out only a few of the answers social studies reformers themselves have given to the question. Sometimes the priority given to curriculum over instruction

by reformers has been justified on the basis of scarce resources. For example, possibly the most comprehensive study of the teaching of American history ever conducted was aimed at identifying the chief problems and suggesting reforms to remedy them (Wesley, 1944). The study was national in scope and funded by the Rockefeller Foundation. Nonetheless, its recommendations “consciously excluded...consideration of classroom methods” because it “would have been beyond the time and resources of the committee” (p. vii). Sometimes, as with the more recent National Commission on Social Studies in the Schools (1989), the centrality of teaching and learning is identified as “the most important thing” (p. 3) and then basically ignored. And sometimes the self-proclaimed primary mission of reformers is to secure a greater share of the curriculum for a particular social studies subject (e.g., Bradley Commission on History in Schools, 1988), although this group, too, hastened to add that its “time and resources” were “too limited to become heavily involved in pedagogical techniques or improved teacher training” (p. 3).

### **The implicit presence of method**

Despite social studies reformers’ disclaimers about inadequate time and resources to address method, most of the proposals they produce contain an implicit view of suitable methods through the types and structures of the courses suggested as well as the desirable outcomes identified. As Dewey (1916) pointed out about method: “We can distinguish a way of acting, and discuss it by itself; but the way exists only as way-of-dealing-with-material” (p. 165). This is illustrated in a major controversy about the teaching of American history during World War II.

The controversy began with charges from the prominent Columbia University historian Allan Nevins (1942). Writing in the New York Times, he charged that schools

and colleges were neglecting the teaching of American history. Nevins attributed this alleged state of affairs to the supplanting of history teaching by the social studies. The Times soon after published the results of a test of 7,000 college freshmen which purportedly revealed a woeful ignorance of American history. A campaign arose for the states to mandate more teaching of history (see Thornton, 1996).

For the purposes of this paper, however, the history campaigners' argument is instructive in several respects. First, as critics of the history campaign quickly pointed out, the central charge, that American history was not being taught, was simply untrue (e.g., Hunt, 1942a). Second, Nevins (1942) had casually made the astonishing assertion that the teaching of American history was an issue which had been "previously ignored," thereby dismissing a generation or more of research and debate on the role of American history in educational programs. Third, even as it became clearer over time that the evidence revealed American history was being taught, the Times continued its campaign to mandate the teaching of more history (Hunt, 1944).

As was noted while this controversy was still unfolding, however, the motives and purposes of these history campaigners warrant scrutiny. For example, what could be read as a straightforward plea for more history content in Nevins' (1942) initial essay on the subject--the parents of the young may have "taught history by old-fashioned methods but were nevertheless taught it"--is arguably more about the aims and methods of history teaching than its inclusion in the curriculum.

This point was not lost on one critic at the time, Edgar B. Wesley (1943), who noted that, as much as anything else, the controversy concerned method: "the way to teach history is to select problems whose solutions involve utilization of history. The

formal, direct, frontal attack [i.e., as in college survey courses] does not seem to be very successful in the case of immature students” (p. 570). To Wesley and other critics such as the then-editor of Social Education, Erling Hunt, the history reformers’ views were naïve, harking back with nostalgia to a supposed golden age when secondary schools had a simple mission: preparation of an elite, homogeneous, academically-oriented student body for college. If this had ever been the case, Wesley and Hunt declared, it no longer was.

Significantly, Hunt also detected more than nostalgia and naïveté among the history reformers on at least two counts. First, the history reformers frequently perceived the social studies as a curricular rival. Thus, the inclusion, even the dominance, of history in social studies programs did not necessarily quell their concerns. Rather, they wanted “history as history,” asserting the unique and irreplaceable role of distinct courses in history for all students (see Wesley, 1944).

Second, some of the history reformers saw the social studies as placing too much emphasis on social activism and social problems. In contrast, they favored the transmission of a more traditional and less critical version of the nation’s past. Even the characteristically moderate Hunt (Mullen, 1996) noted that the history reformers were after “far more” than “adequate attention to American history.” Rather, “economic and social reactionaries” wanted to prevent treatment of “contemporary problems and controversial issues” (Hunt, 1942b). A similar concern about conservative, even reactionary, motives was expressed by historians also. For example, John D. Hicks wrote that “opposition to the Social Studies Program out here [California] comes from people utterly uninterested in content and method.” Rather, Hicks continued, those critics



of the social studies wanted “indoctrination” on the virtues of isolationism and distrust of Great Britain along with their own conception of American free enterprise as “sacrosanct” (quoted in Novick, 1988, p. 369).

The 1940s controversy finds its parallels in the 1990s with the national standards in United States history. Most controversy was generated by what content students would be expected to learn, such as claims that too much attention was paid to previously marginalized groups and individuals at the expense of traditional emphases on heroes, largely white and male, who had woven the fabric of the American story. Equally consequential issues of curricular form and method received only perfunctory treatment in the debate (see, for example, Nash, Crabtree, and Dunn, 1997, p. 270).

As Linda Levstik (1996) notes, in deliberations on the standards, the National Council for the Social Studies Task Force on History Standards recommended “history within a cross-disciplinary social studies framework” rather than “a single chronological framework” (Levstik, 1996). The formulators of the standards, however, chose the single chronological narrative model to convey their conception of what all American youngsters should learn.

Significantly, the formulators seem to have underestimated the potential effects of the long-standing association of such a narrative framework for school history with methods emphasizing the memorization of names and dates. Even if they are correct about the educational merits of the new social history and its methods, the formulators of the standards, by the sheer magnitude of the subject matters specified, send a contrary message on methods to policy makers, test makers, textbook writers, curriculum designers, and teachers.

Moreover, the themes identified in the standards are intended to reflect the best contemporary historical scholarship, but this is too narrow a criterion for designing a school program. Unlike the most successful authors of school history materials in the past such as Charles and Mary Beard (see Crocco, 1997), the formulators' notion of the school history is, in practice, usually little more than making the methods and purposes of academic history accessible to immature learners. For all the formulators' apparent relief at surviving conservative attacks on the allegedly radical content of their standards (see Nash, Crabtree, and Dunn, 1997), it may be what they give short shrift, methods, that they should be more concerned about.

### Conclusion

The scope of the question "why students are not learning what we think they should?", it turns out, is both too broad and too narrow. On the one hand, it seems everyone can agree that students are not learning "enough." However, in the past (Wesley, 1944) and now, no consensus exists on what constitutes "enough." On the other hand, while there probably is wide agreement, for example, that all students should study topics such as the Declaration of Independence and the Civil War, such agreement is not specific about purposes or methods. As Matthew Downey (1996) has observed, policy makers assume that poor test results reflect a lack of exposure to such topics and never question that they may also reflect how students are taught (p. 398).

Clearly struggles over curricular ideology sell newspapers, but they also seem to monopolize debate. Much has been heard about the what of national standards; there has been a comparative silence on how. The effect of this state of affairs has been to marginalize method in educational debate and policy-making. Until content and method

are addressed simultaneously and consistently in social studies reform efforts it will be business as usual in social studies instruction and dissatisfaction with its outcomes will persist.

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